DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 322 533 CS 212 483

AUTHOR Worley, Demetrice A.
TITLE Reading and Writing Transactions: Improving Students' Understanding of Minority Literature.
PUB DATE 23 Mar 90
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (41st, Chicago, IL, March 22-24, 1990).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Black Literature; College English; *Cultural Context; Cultural Traits; Higher Education; Journal Writing; *Literature Appreciation; *Reader Response; Reader Text Relationship; Reading Processes; Reading Writing Relationship
IDENTIFIERS Cultural Sensitivity; Narrative Text; Reading Logs

ABSTRACT

Elements from literary, composition, and reader-response theory can be successfully combined in teaching an African-American literature class to college students of the dominant culture. Helping students to decode texts is of primary importance, best done by introducing students to the cultural codes used by minority writers to shape their themes. Additionally, use of a reading journal encourages student development in both reading and writing skills, while allowing them to make connections between their personal knowledge and the text. Small group and class discussions further augment and enrich students' engagement with minority literature. Students can then share their affective responses to the texts, re-create the texts for each other, examine their criteria for placing importance on features (a word, passage or idea) of a text, and interpret the text communally. (Individual student responses from reading journals are included.) (KEH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED322533

Dr. Demetrice A. Worley
Department of English
and Foreign Languages
March 23, 1990
Conference on College
Composition and Communication

Reading and Writing Transactions:

Improving Students' Understanding Of Minority Literature

Many of the students who take my 200 level African American literature course, are taking it because it fulfills one of their human values general education requirements and /or because they have always wanted to read African American literature, but have never had the chance. As a result, often the literature that we read in the class is new to the students and the students (even the students of color) have problems engaging with the text. The agendas that I bring to my African American literature course are influenced by my training in composition, reader-response theory, and African American literature. As a composition specialist, I view the writing in my literature classroom as more than a means to explicate the literature. The writing is integral in facilitating the students' understanding of themselves and how they make meaning. A large amount of reading and writing, speaking and listening, occur in my classrooms. This combination of activities have proven to be beneficial in teaching African American literature to students of color and to students of the dominant culture. Specifically, a reading journal and small group and whole class discussions enrich students' engagement with African American literature.

CS213483

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Dr. Demetrice Worley

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

When we teach literature from different cultures, it is important that we do not tell students everything they need to know about the text. Telling the students the story's theme does not necessarily make the information their own.

Decoding the Text

When reading texts from cultures which are not normally represented in the literary canon, often students are not familiar with the cultural codes used by these authors. Robert Scholes (1985) explains that "cultural codes enable us to process verbal material: to construct a fictional 'world,' to orient ourselves in it . . . (p. 27). Therefore, if students are not familiar with African-American cultural codes, they might have a hard time understanding the cultural complexities presented in a text written by an African-American author. Richard Wright is one such author whose texts are potentially difficult to understand. Often Wright's texts can remain shut for readers outside of his culture. Katherine Fishburn (1977) states that "reading Richard Wright . . . is an adventure in black perspectives" (p. 192). Without some understanding of the map used in this "adventure," many readers will come away from Wright's texts "lost." For example, in "The Man Who Was Almost a Man," when Dave first fires the gun, he "accidentally" shoots his white boss's mule. This accidental shooting can be interpreted as "Dave's striking out at the oppressor by destroying his property" (Felgar 1980, p. 156). However, in African-American culture, the mule represents the African-American as the beast of

burden. When Dave shoots the mule, he is also killing that part of himself which has been a "slave" for the white man.

Scholes (1985) states, "the more culturally at home in a text our students become, the less dependent they will be on guidance from the instructor" (p. 27). Responding in a reading journal to reader-response questions helps students to engage with a text.

In order to make knowledge their own, students must interact with the texts they are reading. Reader response theory stresses that each reader interprets a given text differently because of each individual's knowledge and emotional background brought to the text when reading. A reading journal provides students with a forum where they can express their thoughts about texts.

Developing Reading and Writing Skills

In addition to helping students decode texts and understand how they shape the texts that they are reading, a reading journal encourages development of both reading and writing skills. Current composition theory and reading theory state that composing and comprehending are "basic reflections of the same cognitive process" (Squire 1983, p. 582). When developing students' writing processes, teachers of literature also develop students' reading processes. According to James Squire (1983),

> Comprehending [reading] is critical because it requires the learner to reconstruct the structure and meaning of ideas expressed by another writer. To possess an idea

> that one is reading requires competence in regenerating the idea, competence in learning how to write the ideas of another. (p. 582)

Writing about texts they have read encourages students to internalize the structure and meaning of another person's ideas. Furthermore, when students write about what they read, they reflect on their transactions as readers. Anthony Petrosky (1982) states:

> Writing about reading is one of the best ways to get students to unravel their [reading] transaction so that we [instructors] can see how they understand and, in the process, help them to elaborate, clarify, and illustrate their responses by reference to the associations and prior knowledge that inform them. (p. 24)

Providing students with an opportunity to write about what they read allows them to draw on past reading and writing schemata to produce concrete evidence of their understanding. In having students respond to what they read, the "response is, then, an explanation of comprehension; and comprehension means using writing to explicate the connections between our models of reality--our prior knowledge--and the texts we create in light of them" (Petrosky 1982, pp. 24-25). Therefore, when students engage with a text, through reading and writing, they are making connections between their personal knowledge and the text.

Reading Journal

Reader-response theory can be seen as moving on a continuum: from subjectivism (David Bleich and William Holland) to phenomenology (Wolfgang Isher and Early Stanley Fish--affective stylistics) to structuralism (Jonathan Culler and Later Stanley Fish--theory of interpretive communities). I use reader-response questions based on Bleich in my African American literature class because of the level of the class and the fact the students often believe that the African American literature is inaccessible. If I were teaching a 300 or 400 level African American literature class, I would also incorporate questions based on Isher and Early Fish and Culler and later Fish.

Subjectivists, such as Bleich, are concerned about the reader's personal emotional response to literature. What is important to Bleich is that the reader learn something about him/herself through an encounter with a text. This is especially important when students are reading minority literature. They need to understand not only the literature, but also how *they* view the literature. To encourage students to include their subjective biases and purposes for reading and coming to literary judgments, Bleich uses a four phrase approach to teaching literature: 1. thoughts and feelings (affect responses to text); 2. feelings about literature (reader subjectively re-created the text and presents it to others); 3. Deciding on literary importance (students examine what was their criteria for placing importance on a word, passage, or feature of a text; and 4. Interpretation as a communal act (students share their individual responses with their peers).

My reader-response approach is a variation of Bleich's approach. Sometimes I give the students affect driven questions to allow them to make connections between their own lives and the texts they are reading. For example:

> *Their Eyes Were Watching God*
>
> Under a pear tree in bloom, Janie realizes that she is a woman. Think back in time and remember when you felt yourself come into being. How old were you? How did you feel? How did other people react to your sense of yourself?

A student's response:

> I am not sure if I remember exactly when I came into myself as a person. . . . Last school year I knew I had to be SOMEBODY, unfortunately I was everybody except me. I was a afraid to be myself, in essence, and it is very hard to escape oneself. I tried on personalities like some would try on underwear. . . . I began to realize over the summer that being me meant making mistakes because I was and am human. this is no crime. It also meant I could learn and continue to grow from what ever experience life gave me. It also made me realize that while trying on personalities was a mistake, I had become more myself through the experience.

Another example of an affect driven question:

> *The Color Purple*
>
> Describe a time in your life in which you put up with conditions with which you were not comfortable. How

did you handle the situation? Did you revolt? If so, why? If not, why?

A student's response:

> You always ask us questions in which I have to dig up something from my subconscious. But that's okay because I have an answer for this one. On e time in my life in which i put up with conditions with which I was not comfortable is when I was pledging. My life was totally changed for five weeks. I couldn't do what I wanted. . . . This time in my life was tense because i didn't know what would happen from day to day. so how did I handle it? Well since this was a situation I put myself in willingly I didn't really complain to people. . . . I didn't revolt . . . If it was a long lasting and everyday was a terror I may have revolted, because I know that you can't continually treat a person wrong, without ever treating them nicely, and expect them not to revolt.

At other times, the students decide on the literary importance of word, passage or feature of the text. For example, when asked to select the most significant word in Chapter 17 of the *Invisible Man*, one student chose the word "black":

> The significant word in this chapter is "Black.: When Ras reminded the invisible man and Todd Clifton that they were black, I think it struck a chord in each one of them. This word reminded the that they could never escape reality, and reality was that they were black. I think the use of this word made Clifton start to

> think about what Ras was preaching. He knew that some of the things Ras was saying were true. . . . I think that because the invisible man was trying to escape his blackness, Ras's revelation made him angry and defensive. . . . Black is the siginifcant word because it just expresses the reality blacks know. No matter how much education or money and no matter how well you are accepted by other races and nationalities you will always be black.

When asked to select the most significant word in the first 29 pages of *The Color Purple*, one student selected "God":

> God is probably the most important word in the first reading assignment. That is the only person that Celie can turn to when she feels despair. Her father says to her "you better not never tell nobody but God. it'd kill your mammy," that may have been her inspiration to start writing mental letters to God. She didn't feel that there was anyone she could talk to about her father's incest, her children being taken away fro, her, her being forced to marry Mr., etc. I also think that God is the important word because of all the words Nettie taught Celie to spell, God was the most significant to her. Celie didn't feel like it was worth living, but she said, ". . . long as I can spell G-O-D I got somebody along" (18). God also signifies to the reader when Celie began to write her letters down. On page 20 of the Pocket Books edition, Celie begins her letter G-O-D.

I also create directed questions which usually focus on the African American cultural codes that I feel the students might not understand or that they might miss in their reading. My questions focus only on *some* of the points in the text. It is not my objective to control the students' reading transactions. Comprone (1986), states:

> Establishing the existence of focal points with the phenomenological process of reading, however, does not necessarily imply that only the teacher knows where meaning exists in a complex text. . . . [Teachers] can make the educated guesses that will most often produce an occasion where writing will help a student reconcile or work out a complex problem in defining meaning. (p. 220)

The following is an example of a directed question:

> In the *Invisible Man*, the protagonist states, "I am standing puzzled, unable to decide to whether the veil is really being lifted, or lowered more firmly in place; whether I am witnessing a revelation or a more efficient binding."
>
> Do you think a university education "lifts" or "lowers" the veil?

A student's response to the question:

> I believe that a university education tends to lower the veil. Social problems tend to not be discussed or down-played. It seems that the courses are designed to not make you think, but be dependent on a system that

> is already in existence. . . . Another reason I say it helps lower the veil is the administration's unwillingness to require students to take classes in minority studies. This says to me, lets keep these students blind to the facts.

Group Discussions

The students discuss their responses in small groups and with the class as a whole (this is similar to Bleich's phase four: interpretation as a communal act). The advantage of students working in small groups is two fold: abilities learned in group work can transfer to the individual, and students can readily comprehend whether their interpretation of the text is based on what is presented in the text or on other personal experiences. Current composition research shows that when students work together on a task, communication abilities learned in the group do transfer to the individual (O'Donnell, Dansereau, Rocklin, Lambiotte, Hythecker, & Larson 1985, pp. 312-13). As a result, when students receive positive and negative feedback from their peers, they can quickly re-evaluate their interpretations of the text. In addition, group activities provide students with the opportunity "to judge whether [their] . . . interpretation, either ignores elements in the text or projects on it experiences for which there is no defensible basis in the text" (Rosenblatt 1978, p. 137). When students in the group stress aspects about the text that one student might have ignored or perhaps presented in a different interpretation, the student will return to the text "in order to point out the elements that evoked his [or her]

response and to see what can justify the other students' responses" (Rosenblatt 1983, p. 110).

After the small group discussions, there is a whole class discussion. This activity allows the students to share their response with the entire class. Furthermore, this classroom discussion reaffirms the students' roles as readers: their authority as readers to assert varying interpretations. Bruce Martin (1989) supports group discussion of literature. He states:

> Interpreting a literary text, and especially the sharing of interpretations--which usually need not be so traumatic as being party to a train crash--allows us not only to engage in a similar search for meaning, but . . . to know, in fact, that several ways of making sense of the text, and especially conflicting ways, will arise and belong properly to any reading experience. (p. 380)

After the class has shared their opinions on the story, the students will either feel more secure in their knowledge that the discussion supported their roles as readers, or the students will realize that they need to re-evaluate the roles they take on while reading literature from African American culture. When students begin to re-interpret the way they evaluate a text, they "may gain some critical consciousness of the strength or weaknesses of the emotional and intellectual equipment with which [they approach] literature (and life)" (Rosenblatt 1983, p. 107).

Critical Opinions

After the students have discussed their responses, I introduce the opinions of several literary critics for examination by the class. Presenting the critics' opinions after the students have determined their own meaning of the text allows students "to discover normal readings on their own, not just obediently to recite some authority's views" (Miller 1980, p. 21).

All literature should command a "non-standard" method of interpretation (moving beyond placing importance on character, plot, setting, and theme). Our students must be encouraged to utilize the reading and writing, speaking and listening processes to understand themselves and how they make meaning. The English Coalition has charged us to prepare students to become active members of our democracy in the twenty-first century. If we are to teach our students to view knowledge as a process and not as a product, we must incorporate activities in our classrooms which illustrate the knowledge process: reading and writing. We must teach them also how to move beyond interpreting pieces of minority literature as they have been "taught to respond to them, seeing in them both what [they] want and have been taught to see" (Hesse 1989, p. 16). Hesse suggests that literature instructors challenge students to question their ideologies and their cultures (p. 20). A reading journal can facilitate students' abilities to determine character, plot, theme, and setting in minority literature, but also it can facilitate students' abilities "to 'close read' beyond the texts, into their own

experience, and beyond that into questions of why they've had those experiences and why they interpret them as they do" (pp. 19-20).

Works Cited

Comprone, Joesph (1986). Integrating the acts of reading and writing about literature: A sequence of assignments based on James Joyce's 'Counterparts.'" In Bruce T. Petersen (Ed.), *Convergences: Transactions in reading and writing* (pp. 215-230). Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

Felgar, Robert (1980). *Richard Wright.* Boston: Twanyne.

Fishburn, Katherine (1977). *Richard Wright's hero: The faces of a rebel-victim.* Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow.

Hesse, Douglas (1989). Some alternatives to character, plot, theme, and setting: Social construction and critical thinking. *Illinois English Bulletin*, 76(2), 12-21.

Martin, Bruce K. (1989). Teaching literature as experience. *College English*, 51(4), 377-385.

Miller, Bruce E. (1980). *Teaching the art of literature.* Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

O'Donnell, Angela M., Dansereau, Donald F., Rocklin, Thomas, Lambiotte, Judith G., Hythecker, Velma I., and Larson, Celia O. (1985). Cooperative writing: Direct effects and transfer. *Written Communication*, 2(3), 307-315.

Petrosky, Anthony R. (1982). From story to essay: Reading and writing. *College Composition and Communication*, 33 (1), 24-25.

Rosenblatt, Louise M. (1978). *The reader, the text, the poem: Transactional theory of the literary work.* Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.

Rosenblatt, Louise M. (1983). *Literature as exploration* (4th ed.). New York: Modern Language Association.

Scholes, Robert (1985). *Textual power: Literary theory & the teaching of English.* New Haven: Yale University Press.

Squire, James R. (1983). Composing and comprehending: Two sides of the same basic process. *Language Arts*, 60(3), 581-582.